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GEORGE LELLIS

Retreat from Romanticism:

TWO FILMS FROM THE SEVENTIES

The European art film of the past few years has been marked by a trend toward the politicized treatment of subjects and situations that only ten years ago would have been considered personal, subjective or psychological. Film-makers have discovered that a socially conscious film need not deal exclusively with the helpless, hungry, *Bicycle Thief* oppressed or overt, violent revolutionary activity, or even with specific points of persuasion. Rather, many new films, such as Alain Tanner's *Retour D'Afrique* or Rainer Werner Fassbinder's *The Merchant of Four Seasons*, are what might be called attitudinally political, and seek a politicized consciousness beyond the realm of agitation and propaganda.

This phenomenon can be traced to the events of May 1968, and the Gallic propensity for living, breathing, eating and drinking politics on at very least a parlor-game level. One allows that as a trend, this may be a function more of fashion than of significantly greater awareness or commitment, but the tendency to mix politics and art is very much a part of the French tradition. The spirit of Jean-Luc Godard, of course, hangs heavily over both the Tanner and the Fassbinder films. In the former, the *hommage* is direct: two Godardian actresses, Anne Wiazemsky and Juliet Bertho, appear as post office workers in a dialectical discussion of revolutionary child rearing with the film's heroine, played by Josée Destoop. Their conversation is accompanied by the kind of rhythmic, lateral camera movements that could refer to no other previous director. Although *Retour D'Afrique* is a very different film from those of Godard, its characters are the sort familiar to us from the likes of *La Chinoise*. Educated, engaged, yet societal misfits, they look for a path toward making their lives socially relevant. In Fassbinder's film, the influence is subtler but no less

marked. Without Godard, one cannot quite imagine the stylized, deadpan acting of *Merchant of Four Seasons*, nor its coldly mechanical treatment of people in alienating, urban environments. But the differences with Godard are where the films acquire their relevance, not in the similarities. In both cases, we see a withdrawal from the extremes of formal experimentation that one finds in the Frenchman's late work. (Tanner and Fassbinder are no doubt wise to avoid competing with the master in that regard.) Rather, they take the area where Godard is often weakest, i.e., the actual clarity of the discourse, and focus attention there.

Retour D'Afrique explores what might be considered the major problem faced by today's college-educated revolutionary: finding a way to action in an affluent, comfortable, superficially peaceful society. The film examines its would-be revolutionary couple in a way that is at once critical and compassionate. They decide to leave the comforts of life in Switzerland to go to North Africa—not with any specific goal to accomplish there, but out of an amorphous feeling that this will somehow bring them more in touch with the Third World, with people, with reality. It is the kind of crazy, unrealistic, simultaneously idealistic and self-centered act that the textbook revolutionaries produced by today's higher education would be attracted to. Tanner pokes gentle fun at this: a going-away party, for example, given despite the fact that the hero's Algerian connection has left them hanging without word, is a desultory affair; the hero and heroine are characterized by a kind of pathetic and likable sincerity that begins to mature only near the film's end. If Godard's raging Marxists are abrasive and pestily egotistical, Tanner's engaged characters, while no less vain, are milder, almost bland. One feels they might rather read than demonstrate. But one also can't help but

feel that Tanner has found what is likely to be the perfect mirror image of what one expects is the audience for this film—the amiable, but somewhat stubbornly genteel committed.

What is remarkable, both aesthetically and dialectically, is the way in which Tanner sees the growth of engagement as a process or system. Revolutionary changes here consist of gradual development rather than drastic, self-defeating measures. The revision of Françoise and Vincent's priorities is a part of that growth. When their plans for Africa go awry, the couple are confronted with themselves, but we see their changes only gradually, both while they are sheepishly holed up in their empty apartment and after. The decision to remain in Switzerland is presented not as a major dramatic scene, but is worked into the fabric of their daily activities as they pick them up and resume them. In the schema the film sets up, each change becomes subtly moving. Vincent is forced to shift his attentions away from his directionless idealism and toward more immediate problems, such as his male chauvinism toward his girl; when she gets a job, it is not in the presumably chic art gallery where she had worked before, a kind of nest of bourgeois comfort, but in a post office, where she can relate to her proletarian peers; when forced to move out of their apartment, they find not the kind of enviable, bohemian garret that they had before, but a modern, im-

personal apartment in the middle of the flight paths to the airport, for which they must organize a rent strike among the tenants; their decision to have a baby becomes a political one as well. Some of these changes are voluntary, some forced upon them. All indicate not only the inseparability of personal and political life, but they have a poetic determinism about them as well, whereby a foolhardy safari is converted into a genuine coping with social realities. One advances toward commitment on all fronts, the film asserts.

Stylistically, *Retour D'Afrique* is characterized by noteworthy sobriety. Shot in soft 16mm black-and-white and unobtrusively edited, it stands in reaction to the audiovisual elaborateness that one associates with sixties film-making, even against a certain falseness that would be inherent in a pseudo-vérité style. Appropriately, one doesn't talk about the compositions or camerawork in a film like the Tanner work, one talks about the content. And with much of the film done in long shot, a sense of detachment is ever present, one in keeping with the tone of a film in tri-partite balance between satire, affection and didacticism, a film which demonstrates the banality of the Swiss urban landscape by indicating nothing of particular note to look at on it.

Retour D'Afrique differs from conventional propaganda in that it makes a serious effort to

Alain
Tanner's
RETOUR
D'AFRIQUE



link politics with psychology. The two are, for it, inseparable. A person's consciousness is influenced by the society in which he develops; a change in that society can be brought about only by a change in consciousness. In light of this line of thought, much contemporary film that does not nominally treat political issues is nonetheless a product of a politicized consciousness. To the extent that we know the context of Marxist thought (however corrupt or revisionist) in which it was produced, it is not at all amiss to discuss, let us say, *Last Tango in Paris* politically, even though it deals superficially with sexual passion alone. Rainer Werner Fassbinder's *The Merchant of Four Seasons* lends itself particularly well to this type of treatment. Although its story is the sort more suited to a clinical case history than a political pamphlet, the work makes the most sense when dealt with as social and aesthetic commentary.

A man, most easily described as an archetypal loser, suffers—to put *Merchant's* events in chronology—first, humiliation (he is busted as a policeman for accepting services from a prostitute he is questioning) then even further humiliation (the girl with whom he is in love will not marry him because he is merely a fruit seller), then, after what appears to have been a satisfying courtship degenerated into a cold and loveless marriage, physical distress (apparent alcoholism, followed by a heart attack), all leading to decreased activity (he must hire an assistant for his work), increased lethargy (he is too indifferent even to let his former love seduce him), despair, and finally suicide.

The movie's biggest *coup* is that our feelings for the man are never really for him personally—he is ugly and unsympathetic throughout. The film remains outside of him, something that gives us, in the final analysis, more of a portrait of the world that made him than one of the man himself. And it is a cold, unfeeling world. That Hans Epp is fundamentally unloved is established from the picture's first frame, when he comes home from the Foreign Legion and his mother tells him it's too bad all the *good* ones die in wars and those like him remain; but the rest of the work portrays a society in which all

potentially meaningful things are ritualized into mechanism. Religion is present (from the crucifix prominent on the wall of Epp's apartment), but offers no help. Marital love is a memory (alive only in a cheap Italian phonograph record that Epp listens to obsessively). Sex is somber and joyless, marriage little more than a convenience (the wife marries her husband's only real friend right after he dies). Family life consists solely of acts of aggression and protection. Even social drinking is turned, in Epp's final suicide, into a fatal, unfeeling rite performed among people who seem disturbingly unconcerned. As an attack on society, *The Merchant of Four Seasons* is diffuse, to say the least, but it is in this diffusion that it achieves most of its power, and its ultimate, paradoxical lucidity.

One cannot look at the film without thinking of Brecht. Events in it are never quite believable as naturalism, and their blunt portrayal, particularly early in the work, mixed with the script's stilted, haltingly wordy dialogue, clearly suggest that distancing is its stylistic aim. A scene in which Epp beats his wife as his child simultaneously beats her father is so unmodulated, goes on for so long, and is so clearly mechanical for the actors participating, that even while the viewer knows that no one is really being hurt, he responds strongly to the *idea* of the wife's being hurt this way; and the scene is no less chilling as a result. A story which some ten or twenty years ago would have been presented as a subjective, solipsistic study of a suicide here becomes a vision of German life which implies throughout that such an existence must change. The film calls out for a committed response not only because we know that Fassbinder is an

Fassbinder's MERCHANT OF FOUR SEASONS ▶



engaged film-maker, but also because it allows us no other way to respond. *Merchant of Four Seasons* treats a psychological subject, but denies the audience all of its conventional psychological responses.

Such an approach represents a retreat away from romanticism, something else Fassbinder has in common with Tanner (though certainly not with Bertolucci), and toward a type of filmmaking that finds its inspiration not so much in internal experience as in external observation. In this way, these films tend to be modern in the way that many of the cooler, less involving forms of painting, sculpture, and writing of the past several years have been. In ambience, these new political films become almost the narrative cousins of "structural" cinema. They treat social structures in a systematically analytical way comparable to the way in which Michael Snow or Hollis Frampton treat physical perception. *The Merchant of Four Seasons* is often a beautiful film to look at, but one never can (as with, let us say, Fellini or Antonioni or even Godard) separate its physical beauty from its moral message. Even the movie's most striking visual moment—Epp's funeral, in which his wife identifies his former lover as "the love of his life," the latter carrying a bouquet of red roses comparable to the one Epp offered her when she rejected him—is subverted for us emotionally by our having to fit this new piece of information into the whole portrait on both a visual level and a literary one. Fassbinder keeps the two shots to the rose bearer short and unemphasized, despite the quick, rhetorical zoom toward her in the first. The effect is electric, but only after the cognition has registered fully.

Unlike the comparatively classic *Retour D'Afrique*, *Merchant of Four Seasons* is shot in a manner that is far more rigidly stylized than appears at first glance. Fassbinder's compositions are most often frontal, roughly symmetrical and from an angle just below eye level of his characters. This avoidance of oblique points of view reaches an effective extreme in the scene just before Epp's heart attack: the camera has so studiously avoided floors and ceilings that we don't become aware of the crimson carpet on the floor until Epp falls to it—the moment at which the color, now suddenly dominant, can take on significance.

The movie's editing produces a series of abrupt starts and stops rather than a graceful flow, and it plays an important part in the construction of each episode. The director frequently holds shots for a few beats longer than one would expect, but the resultant weightiness seems only to make the main character's plight more tangible. Like Griffith, Fassbinder will analytically split up a scene into its constituent parts, often repeating compositions and groupings in the process. Epp's final suicide, for example, is portrayed with conventional A-B-A-B crosscutting, from Epp to each of the people around him and back again; but the scene is given an incredible ominousness by the repeated tapping of his glass on the table, as each successive drink is fatally consumed.

Camera movement is minimal in *Merchant*. The director prefers the zoom, here an artificial device for mechanical emphasis which appropriately complements the artificial mechanics of his mock melodrama, and which somehow preserves the sense obtained from the film's editing

RETOUR
D'AFRIQUE



of scenes shaped with a Léger-like, cubist solidity. Fassbinder constructs a whole by putting together the simplest, heaviest, most basic cinematic pieces, making functional visuals take form with a life they would not otherwise have had. Even the sound track reflects the movie's predominant negative tone by having a constant, whispering background of automobiles and street noise: the mechanized city is always somewhere behind the action.

Thus, *Retour D'Afrique* and *The Merchant of Four Seasons* work differently from conventional propaganda in their attempts to merge the personal and psychological sides of human experience with political meaning and significance. They work on two levels, seeking to find the logic in emotions and the emotion in logic, the place of politics in the personality, the personal need for political change. For them, political expression is a fundamental side of personal expression. That they preach to the converted may well be irrelevant, for their argu-

ments are at a level of sophistication and complexity that may be meaningful only to the converted. The one may be a little sermon on morality (*Retour D'Afrique*), the other on the problem of why there is evil in the world (*Merchant*), but in each case the didacticism is wholly secondary, or, more correctly, fully integrated into the whole.

What remains ironic, however, is that after the short-lived and abortive pre-revolutionary activities of the late sixties, such typical seventies films come after the fact, as post-activity rationalization, perhaps, or as a testament to the way in which their makers' lives have been affected by the leftist thought of the time. Their subdued manner may well represent the only viable alternative for a committed sensibility not terribly optimistic about the possibilities for social change. But as works which commingle the personal and political spheres of human existence, they allow the one to enrich the other and become both ethically and aesthetically satisfying.

MARSHA KINDER

The Tyranny of Convention in *The Phantom of Liberty*

The Phantom of Liberty has been damned with faint praise—particularly by critics who complain that it treats material already covered more successfully in earlier Buñuel films, most notably in *The Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie*. There is no one more aware of this thematic and stylistic continuity than Buñuel, the master ironist himself, who brilliantly uses his latest film to comment on his own entrapment and that of his audience.

Phantom of Liberty is a film about the impossibility of escaping the tyranny of convention in

politics, society, and art. Opening with the image of Goya's political painting "The Third of May" (1808), Buñuel dramatizes these events in Toledo as a Napoleonic firing squad executes Spanish patriots seeking liberty. He soon allows us to escape from these brutal murders into the comic absurdities of the gothic tale in which they occur (a statue of a Spanish knight strikes the French officer who makes amorous advances to the statue of his lady; the captain gets his revenge by exhuming the lady's dead body). Then, we escape even farther into the twentieth-century